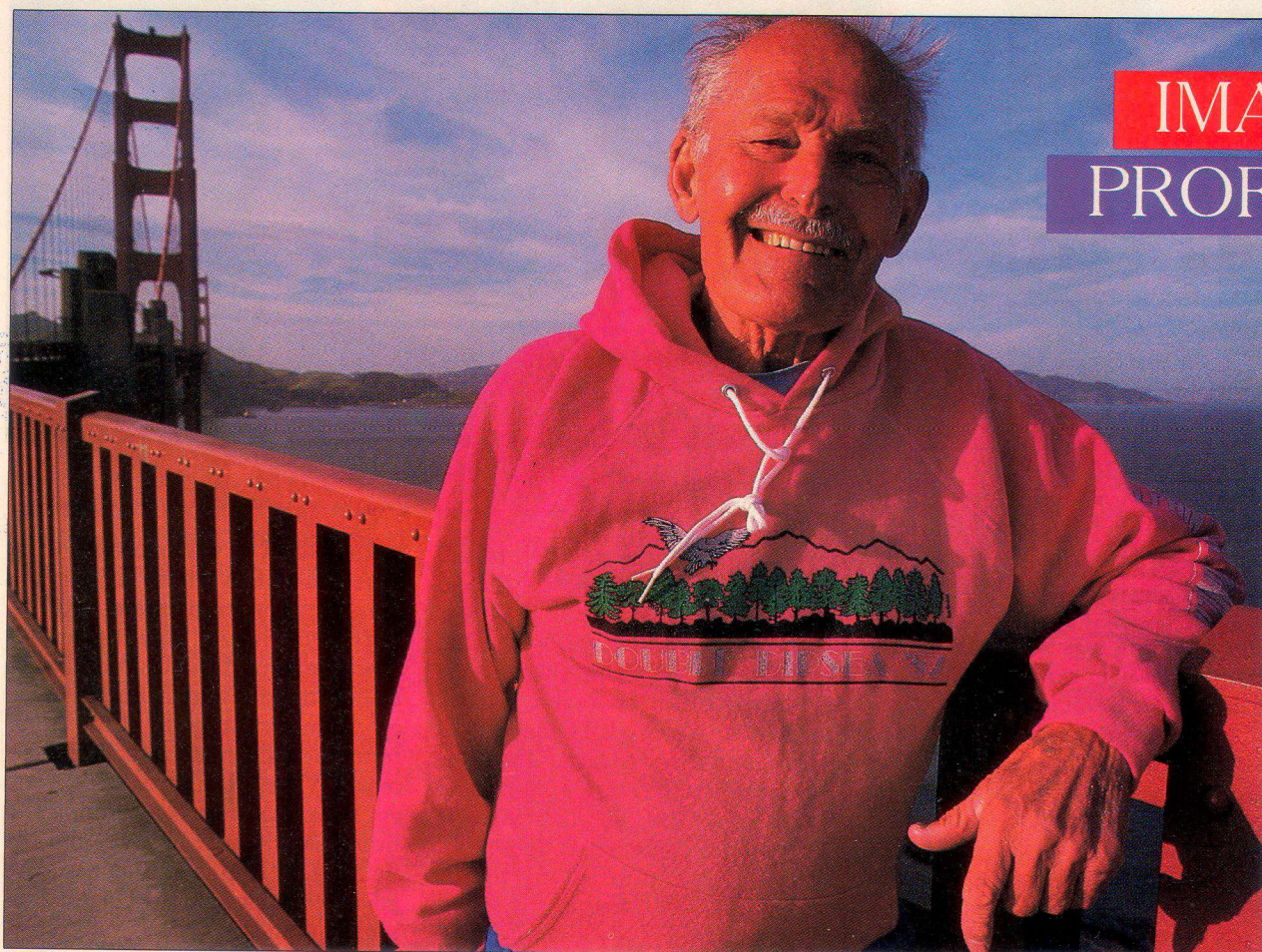


Marathon man

IMAGE
PROFILE



Walt Stack is the grand old man of San Francisco runners.

The most fit man alive," declared Jack LaLanne, the potentate of physical prowess, in a *Playboy* magazine interview four years ago, "is a guy from San Francisco named Walt Stack."

At the time Stack was 77. He had run close to 150 marathons and had competed in the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii two years before. In that endurance test, he swam two miles, bicycled 112 and then ran a 26-mile marathon. It took him 27 hours to finish. He was the oldest man in the

race, but he wasn't much past his prime.

Stack is a leader among a generation of older Americans who are staying physically fit, but he didn't strive to be a role model of healthy aging. "I run," says Stack simply, "because it makes me feel good."

He stands in the front room of his Potrero Hill apartment, holding his breakfast in one hand. He's dressed for a jog, wearing snug-fitting shorts and nothing else. His tawny skin glows in the morning light. His arms are covered with

tattoos of busty women and roses.

"I've got to be on the Golden Gate Bridge in 10 minutes," he says, as he lifts a pile of newspapers in search of his car keys. "I'm running with the Navy War College. They're a bunch of would-be admirals."

Walt Stack gets constant invitations to join runs. But at 81, he's cutting back his schedule. And why not? So far he's jogged two-and-a-half times the circumference of the earth, nearly 65,000 miles.

In running circles, he's a celebrity. To many of the 29 million Amer-

By Maria Brooks / Photographs by Carolyn Cole



Walt Stack with two fellow members of the Dolphin Club at the end of Hyde Street near Fisherman's Wharf.

icans over the age of 65, Walt Stack has become a folk hero. He's written about, he's photographed, he's studied by gerontologists. And this year he's featured in national TV commercials for running shoes.

The commercial shows Stack running across the Golden Gate Bridge. As the camera zooms in, Stack says, "People ask me how I keep my teeth from chattering in the wintertime." He grins. "Well, I leave them in my locker."

In real life those teeth got knocked out in a street fight 60 years ago. He was punching a sheriff in a "little cockroach port" in Louisiana when a brick hit him in the face. "I wound up in the bucket for 90 days."

Walt Stack has a past as extraordinary as the life he leads today. He came of age in the Depression, living on the lam. He went to sea and worked in the boiler rooms of coal-burning ships. He became a leader on the waterfront, a union organizer and a Communist.

In a small room reserved for trophies and books Stack finds his lost car keys on a shelf. Above a bookcase hangs a framed letter from then Mayor Dianne Feinstein announcing "Walt Stack Day" in San Francisco. Feinstein called him "a

leader and legend in his own time."

Stack picks up the keys and walks to the front door.

On an average day Stack rides his bike to his swim club in the morning. From there he jogs 17 miles, over the Golden Gate to Sausalito and back again. Then he jumps in the Bay for a 30-minute swim. Afterward, he takes a sauna to warm up, then pedals home.

But today he's driving to the bridge because of the date with the Navy brass.

"I used to run about 14 marathons a year," he says, climbing into his white Dodge. "But this year I've run only one and that was Pike's Peak." At one time he ran this high altitude marathon course eight times in nine days, just for practice.

Not bad for a man who was nearly 60 when he started running.

"I was never athletic. But I used to go to pools when I was working the building trades because I was laid off a lot. I did have endurance. That's how I got into running. People told me it would improve my lung power."

Stack took to it rapidly. He started getting up at 2:30 in the morning so that he could run 17 miles and swim before going to work. One morning he fell into a manhole. He

learned to swim with a broken wrist after that. "But within a year," he says, "I was running marathons."

It was during this time that Stack organized the Dolphin South End Runners, a club in San Francisco promoting regular "fun runs" from their headquarters at Fisherman's Wharf. At first, Stack's group got little attention. But running and fitness suddenly caught on and the South End Runners, under Stack's guidance, grew into the biggest running club in the West.

A few months ago Stack had an ulcer attack. His doctors told him to cut out the six shots of vodka he drank in the afternoons. They also told him to cut back on his running.

"If I'm slowing down it's because my body is telling me to, not because of what doctors say," says Stack. "I'm not running as fast as I used to. It's just age. I don't fight it."

The clock on the tollgate flashes 8:00 as Stack turns into the parking lot near the Golden Gate Bridge. A dozen men stand on the sidewalk near the entrance to the bridge; nearby is a chartered bus. Stack walks over to the group, smiling broadly. The military men gather around him. "I saw you on TV last night," says a tall African with a

French accent, reaching his hand around the others to touch Stack.

Stack listens carefully as the captain introduces the men. When he finishes, Stack launches into a bawdy tale and as he talks, his body is in constant motion.

Stack ends his story and looks over at the bridge. "I shuffle," he announced to the men. "Those of you who run faster can take off now and we'll all meet on Vista Point on the Marin side."

Quickly the group divides. Several men sprint in the direction of the tower. The captain and two cadets stay with Stack, running alongside, followed by two more cadets.

Stack runs with a rolling stride, not much faster than a brisk walk. "When I'm going uphill," he says to the captain, "I sound like an obscene phone call, I'm puffing so much. I think it's because of the two-packs-a-day I smoked for years."

The captain smiles and looks out at the Bay. A large container ship is meandering through the gate past a hazy Alcatraz Island.

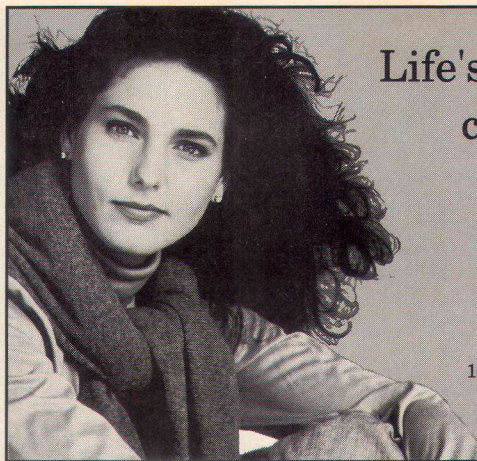
"Looks pretty bleak over there," says the captain. Stack, for the first time, says nothing.

Many years ago he was a prisoner on Alcatraz, when the Rock was used as an Army Disciplinary Barracks. Before he reached age 20, Stack had joined the Army twice, enlisting each time because he had nowhere else to go.

Walt Stack was a child of the Detroit streets. His parents, Polish immigrants, were dirt poor and often drunk. His family fell apart in his early childhood and he was placed in various orphanages.

On his own by the time he entered his teens, he hopped freight trains, slept in hobo jungles and lived by his wits. He often went hungry. The hobos told him to go into the Army; there, he'd eat three meals a day. At 15 he enlisted.

He had to lie about his age to enlist, so when he went AWOL a few months later, he figured the score was even. He drifted on the edge of society, spending time in



Life's deepest scars
can't be seen
on the outside.



1-800-654-8968 or 1-415-368-4134
1600 Gordon Street, Redwood City, CA 94061

Treatment of chemical dependency,
eating disorders, and depression.

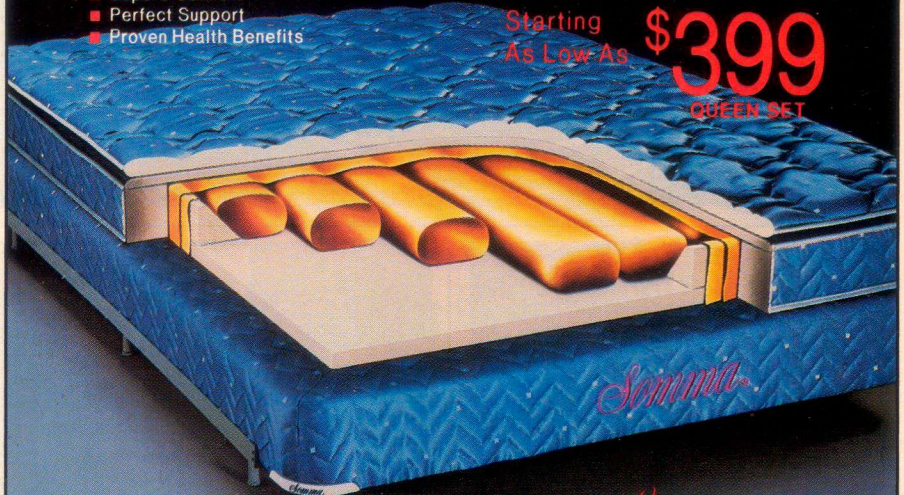
MATTRESS OF THE YEAR!

Come test rest the McCall's Magazine
"Mattress of the Year!"
Exclusively at the Somma Dealer of the Year.
San Carlos Waterbeds & Mattress

The mattress provides:
■ Superb Comfort
■ Perfect Support
■ Proven Health Benefits

We have over 90 beds to choose from and
over 30 bedroom sets on display.
Special Discount For Handicapped
or Disabled Persons

Starting
As Low As **\$399**
QUEEN SET



**SAN CARLOS
WATERBEDS**
AND MATTRESSES!

184 EL CAMINO REAL • SO. SAN FRANCISCO
TELEPHONE (415) 583-2221

Somma MATTRESSES
Sleep better when you
sleep with Somma . . .

TWO NEW LOCATIONS GRAND OPENING SALE

Biggest "In Stock" selections
of Bar Stools in the Bay Area
Our 25th Year. Fast Delivery

HOUSE OF
STOOLS 'N BARS

Closed Wednesdays

543-1100

216 Townsend St., San Francisco

697-6654 / 697-7866

231 East Millbrae Ave., Millbrae



Elégance Paris Fabrics

567 Sutter St., San Francisco, CA
(Between Powell & Mason)

ANNUAL SUMMER REMNANT SALE

ALL 50% - 75% OFF
JUNE 19-24

- All Garment Length Pieces
- Extra Discount 3 or more Remnants
- Biggest Selection Ever

SAN FRANCISCO'S EXCITING
NEW SOURCE FOR FASHION FABRICS.
Mon-Sat 10-6 • 421-6377



jails for vagrancy and working on chain gangs. After a couple of years of this kind of life, the Army looked good again.

Using a phony name, he signed up. But after working a few months as a medic, he confessed his real identity to his commanding officer. He was court-martialed and spent 14 months in federal prisons, including five on the Rock.

Stack stares over at Alcatraz, with its abandoned buildings reflecting the morning sunlight. Suddenly a car honks behind him. Without turning his head, Stack lifts his left arm and waves.

He has run the bridge for 25 years and many people recognize him. Honking their car horns as they pass, strangers as well as friends salute him.

"I give everybody I hear a wave," he says. "Even if I can't see who they are."

Stack first came to San Francisco in 1936. The City was gearing up for a waterfront strike. As a member of his union's strike committee, Stack was sent down from Seattle to attend negotiations.

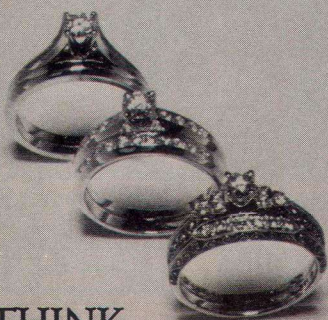
He was now a Communist. In his early 20s he had gone to sea. Working with the black gangs in the engine rooms of coal-burning freighters, he was radicalized. He was an apt pupil, bright and charismatic. He was chosen by his left wing union to study in Russia for 18 months to become a Marxist leader on the waterfront.

When he came back to the States, he was no longer the aimless young drifter. He took his politics seriously and became a union organizer and dedicated activist.

"Sometimes ships came into port with the engine crew in a beef with one of the officers," recalls retired longshoreman Bill Bailey, who has known Stack for more than 50 years. "Walter would go down to the ship and win all sorts of conditions for the guys. The crew knew that he'd fight like a son of a bitch for them. He never falls apart. The more the heat's on, the stronger Walter becomes."

THE LAZARE DIAMOND™

WHEN IT COMES
TO DIAMONDS...



THINK
BRILLIANCE.

The Lazare Diamond.
Setting the standard for
brilliance.™

Timothy Fidge & Co.
creative jewelers
fine gem specialists

MEMBER AMERICAN GEM SOCIETY

Town & Country Village, Palo Alto
(415) 323-4653

The One Stop Maternity Shop

For Expectant
Mothers

Anticipation

2111 Union Street
San Francisco
(415) 441-3396

Ken Topping
HOME IMPROVEMENTS

CERTIFIED
FABRICATOR • INSTALLER
License #141304

CORIAN®

Countertops You Can Live With
and Live With and Live With
IN KITCHENS & BATHS

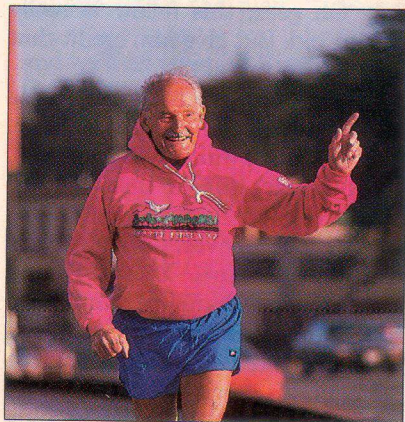
"Chosen Once, Cherished Forever"

731-3930

Showroom: 1901 Lawton
Open Mon-Sat, 9-4:30

NATIONAL KITCHEN
NKBA
& BATH ASSOCIATION

For Stack the heat got red hot after World War II. The country drifted into an anti-red scare steered by Sen. Joseph McCarthy. Stack was blacklisted from his union when the ranks were purged of leftists. He was barred from going to sea. His wife at the time was jailed in an FBI sweep of activists.



Drivers honk and wave as Walt runs by.

Eventually he got a job as a hod carrier, lugging 150 pounds of wet mortar in a trough on his shoulders, delivering it up ladders to the bricklayers on construction sites. He worked as a hod carrier until he retired at 75.

Stack remains a member of the Communist Party and attends weekly meetings, even when he's on a training schedule. "The self-discipline Walter learned in the Party, he carried into his running regime," says Marci, his wife of 29 years. "That's what makes him succeed."

The only time Stack avoids politics is when he's on a run. The barriers come down. Stack mixes with people, including some who represent causes he's spent a lifetime opposing, and he focuses on supporting others who share his love of running.

"It's a great feeling when people call me by name and I don't even know them," Stack says. "Sometimes when I start a run I think to myself, 'I can't let these people down.'"

"It comes natural to slow down as you get old," Stack says, waving to a honking car. "But everyone has

"COLLAGE" for the Bath



MEDINA from

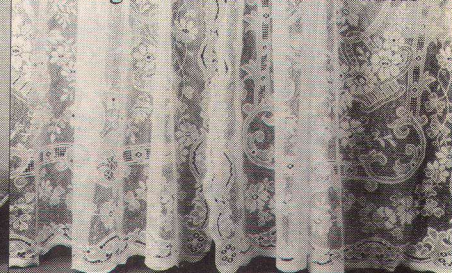
ATELIER
MARTEX



CARNIVALE by *Fieldcrest*



Nottingham Lace Curtain Panels



WHITE SALE!

Join us for a storewide celebration. Everything is now on sale for a limited time. Pictured above are four of the product areas we specialize in. In addition to a complete selection at low prices, we feature excellent service.



280 Metro Center, Colma, Ca ■ Mon-Fri 10-9, Sat 10-7, Sun 12-6 ■ Telephone: 992-0210

french *justine* fashion boutique
3263 sacramento st. at presidio
san francisco, ca 94115

spring/summer
sale
30% to 50%
off

tuesday
through
saturday
10:30 - 6

(415)
921-9548

the only
real
french
boutique
in the
bay area



HOME YARDAGE FACTORY OUTLET

*Drapery &
Upholstery Fabrics*



- Brocades
- Prints
- Velvets

BE YOUR OWN DECORATOR

1.99 Yd to 10.99 Yd Save 50/75%

On famous name decorator fabrics - Waverly, John Wolf, Lancot and many more.

**HOME
Yardage**

The store for The Original Thinkers®
3945 Alemany Blvd. San Francisco 755-0440

**Between
Payless &
Luckys**

AFFORDABLY ELEGANT

CUSTOM DESIGNED CLOSET SYSTEMS



- ◆ Fully Adjustable ◆ Variety of Finishes ◆
- ◆ Factory Direct ◆ European Styling ◆
- ◆ Prompt, Professional Service ◆

Closet
DIMENSIONS

**Call Now To Arrange Your
FREE DESIGN CONSULTATION**

(415) 594-1155 • (408) 971-1400

You'll wonder why you waited so long!
1480 Industrial Road, San Carlos

SKIVVIES UNDERWEAR

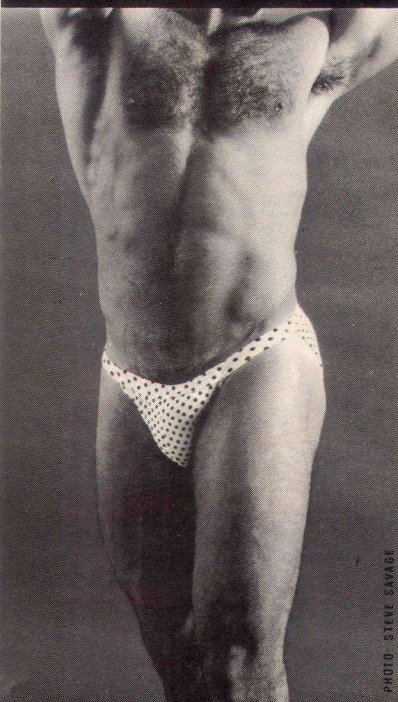


PHOTO: STEVE SAVAGE

**2040 UNION.SF
TEL: 922-6915**

a certain pride. You know you can't win the race, but you want to be in with the crowd of finishers, not back at the end by yourself.

"Nowadays I finish way in the back and everybody's gone home. I miss the comradery and the good talk at the end of a race. And coming in last, I think people are figuring, 'Oh geez, this fellow is really getting old. But give him credit that he's able to run at all.'"

The captain laughs as they come off the bridge on the Marin side. The cadets are waiting near the bus, which is ready to take them to their next excursion.

As Stack arrives, several of the men take pictures. They surround him, each one thanking him for the run. Stack smiles, lifting his cap and brushing back his hair with the palm of his hand. "The secret of running," says Stack, "is keeping one foot in front of the other."

"Now you fellows go and enjoy yourselves," he says almost abruptly. "I'm going to run to Sausalito."

The men begin to board the bus as Stack leaves. He looks over his shoulder and waves as he starts down a winding road to the town three miles away.

Halfway down the hill Stack stops. He reaches to the ground and picks up a battered ball-point pen. He stuffs it in the waistband of his shorts.

Stack enters Sausalito with its rustic homes looking down from their hillside perches. He runs along the road leading to the center of town. At an intersection he passes a young woman walking a dog. The woman stops. She stares at Stack while her dog barks. "Hey man, where you going?" she shouts.

But Stack doesn't hear her. He's moving quickly now down the narrow streets to the waterfront.

Seeing the boat harbor ahead, he smiles. Inside his socks he's got two bucks. At a store near here, he'll buy a can of beer and toast the morning.

And then, keeping one foot in front of the other, he'll journey home again. ■

Maria Brooks is an Oakland writer.